

Fairbury's African American History 1857-1922

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In 1976, President Gerald Ford officially recognized the month of February as Black History Month. President Ford called upon the public to “seize the opportunity to honor the too-often neglected accomplishments of black Americans in every area of endeavor throughout our history.”

One of the first Fairbury African American stories began with Dr. C. B. Ostrander. He was the first medical Doctor in the Fairbury area. He was also a staunch Abolitionist. One day he came into Fairbury and found a fugitive slave chained to the floor of a two-story building circa 1860. This fugitive slave was going to be returned to his master in Virginia. Using a crow-bar, sledgehammer, and chisel, the Doctor cut the shackles from the fugitive slave. He loaded the fugitive into a horse-drawn buggy and delivered him to Dr. C. V. Dyer in Chicago. Ostrander also gave the fugitive \$10 in cash. The slave was placed on the steamer "Illinois," commanded by Captain Blake. The boat transported him to freedom in Maiden, Canada. Dr. Ostrander was buried in Fairbury's Graceland cemetery.

A 1976 Blade story recounted that Fairbury had a station on the Underground Railway to help free slaves. The station was a little cabin north of Fairbury on the Vermilion River. The Blade recounted this portion of the Underground Railway ran between Strawn and Odell. Unfortunately, the Blade story gave no reference to the source of this information. No modern-day evidence could be found to support this story.

The first written mention of African Americans living in Fairbury occurred in the 1878 Livingston County history book by William Le Baron. This history book recounted that one of the most unusual and exciting incidents in Fairbury was the first black man to vote in an election. The 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified on February 3, 1870. This Amendment granted African American men the right to vote in elections.

Fairbury held a township officer election just a few days after the 15th Amendment was ratified. Richard Quarles, an African American man living in Fairbury, was widely known as "Side Hill Dick" because one of his legs was several inches shorter than the other leg. He listed his occupation in the Census as a boot-black. So many Fairbury citizens wanted to witness the historical event of Richard Quarles voting that the history book said it was almost a circus atmosphere on election day. This book recounted that nobody challenged the right of Mr. Quarles to vote, and no issues were encountered when he voted in the township election.

Alma Lewis James, a Fairbury historian, recounted in her book *Stuffed Clubs & Antimaccassars* another incident involving Richard Quarles. John Virgin was a prominent Fairbury businessman. He imported Percheron horses from France and sold them to

Fairbury area farmers. One day, Virgin came upon a fistfight in the street. A crowd had gathered to watch a drunk white man start a fight with the disabled Richard Quarles. John Virgin immediately stepped in and broke up the fight.

Michael Lucas Sullivant started farming his 40,000-acre farm in 1867 in what we now call Sibley, Illinois. He needed 140 men to operate his farm, the largest in the United States at that time. Mr. Sullivant encountered some massive financial headwinds. The first problem was the Panic of 1873. This panic was a financial crisis that triggered a worldwide economic depression. In addition to the Panic of 1873, Burr Oak farm experienced three bad harvest years in a row. Mr. Sullivant was unable to make the interest payments due to his lenders. He laid-off many of the farmworkers, and his creditors took over the farm in 1878. Many of these laid-off black farm workers moved to Fairbury.

The 1878 history book recounted there were about 100 African Americans living in Fairbury in that era. There were enough African Americans in Fairbury to support a church, the A.M.E., or African Methodist Episcopal Church. This church was located at the southwest corner of Walnut and Second Streets in Fairbury.

The Sanborn Insurance company made maps of Fairbury for five different years between 1885 and 1911. The 1885 Sanborn map of Fairbury shows the A.M.E. church located at 200 South Second Street. There was a large feed barn between the church and the alley to the south. This map proves this church was built sometime before 1885. This same church is also shown on the 1911 Sanborn map, which is the last year of making these maps. Unfortunately, there are no known photos of this church.

In 1898, Rev. C. H. Sheen was the pastor of this church. In the December 1907 Blade, the A.M.E. church held a possum supper as a fundraising event. The pastor for both the Fairbury and Pontiac A.M.E. churches in 1921 was the Rev. A. A. Sheen.

A review of the 1880 U.S. Census found 92 African Americans were living in Fairbury and the three townships that make up the Fairbury area (Avoca, Indian Grove, and Belle Prairie). This number of 92 is relatively close to the population of 100 referred to in the 1878 history book.

One surprising finding of the 1880 Census review was that 76 out of the 92 African Americans living in Fairbury were born in the same state of Tennessee. It is unknown why so many people came from the same area to live in Fairbury. The population of Fairbury was 2,140 citizens. If there were about 100 African Americans living in Fairbury, they represented 4.7% of the total population.

Many photographs from the early 1900s illustrate that Fairbury schools were fully integrated. For example, an old picture of the 1903 Fairbury Township football team shows the high school team had 12 team members. Two of the players, Dan McLain and Jim Walker, were African Americans.

African Americans attended the same schools as whites and were also buried in the same Graceland Cemetery. African Americans also participated in civic events. The 1976 Blade ran a series of historical Fairbury photographs. One of these was an undated photograph of a community sack race held on Locust Street. In the picture, Richard Quarles was one of the contestants in this sack race.



The 1903 Fairbury football team featured two African Americans. Team members in the front row included Tom Westervelt, Harry Perlee, Fred Carrithers, Ray Chapman, and Clarence Dexter. In the second row was Dan McLain, Merle Gardineer, Jim Walker, and Gary Veeder. In the third row was Ray Scriven, Coach Friedman, Fred Perlee, and H. B. Bedell.



An integrated sack race on East Main Street for both participants and spectators. At one time, about 100 blacks lived in and near Fairbury. They attended the same schools as whites but went to different Methodist and Baptist churches and Sunday schools. Most came from Mike Sullivan's farm in Fayette Township. Fairbury's best-known black was Richard "Side Hill Dick" Quarles, who became the first Negro to vote in Fairbury, in an 1870 township election. His voting was witnessed by a large crowd in a circus atmosphere. Fairbury's blacks staged Possum Suppers and concerts to raise money for their churches. There was also a Colored Brass Band. Fairbury had a station on the Underground Railway to help free slaves. It was a little cabin in the woods near the river. The Railway portion which concerned Fairbury ran between Strawn and Odell.

Photo from 1976 Pontiac Daily Leader special story on Fairbury history. Caption information was likely provided by Alma Lewis James - Fairbury Historian. Captioned noted that many blacks worked on Sullivan's farm in Sibley moved to Fairbury after he went bankrupt.